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SUBJECT Disclosing Identities of Covert Intelligence Agents

SANFORD UNGAR: Several years ago, a former CIA agent named Philip Agee published a book, "Inside the Company: CIA Diary." It included what he said were names of CIA agents. Agee claimed that this would inhibit overt American interference in the affairs of other countries. That incident led the Senate to hold hearings on legislation to protect the identity of intelligence agents. This week the Senate Intelligence Committee voted unanimously for a bill that would make it a crime for private citizens to disclose the identities of covert intelligence agents in certain circumstances.

David Wise, a longtime student of the CIA, is coauthor of "The Invisible Government." He commented today on that bill.

DAVID WISE: The feeling was, certainly within the intelligence community, and it's more widely shared by a lot of people in Congress, I imagine, was that to name agents of the CIA places them in danger, and that something should be done about it.

UNGAR: Well, that is true, isn't it, that naming the agents places them in danger?

WISE: Well, it is and it isn't. The first reaction of anybody, I think, most Americans, to the naming of an intelligence agent would be, "This is a terrible thing to do, and it's horrible, and something should be done." And that kind of gut reaction is, I think, why Congress is now moving toward passing the so-called Agee bill designed to prevent this.

But let's go back to Watergate. You recall that Howard Hunt and James McCord, two of the burglars who went into the

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Watergate, had worked for CIA. Now, if such a bill would apply to the press, for example -- and I believe the present version being considered in the Senate would apply to the press -- why, it might be a crime for the Washington Post to print the fact that Howard Hunt and James McCord had worked for the CIA.

UNGAR: Well, what we're talking about here is a kind of classic balancing act that has to be performed. There ought to be some way to protect people who are operating legitimately for the CIA without becoming unreasonable about it and preventing the public from knowing the things that it's entitled to know. I mean how does one walk that narrow line?

WISE: Well, the word "balancing" is exactly right. It's a balancing act between -- as it always is -- between the requirements of national security and the requirements of the First Amendment. If you're going to have a First Amendment, then you have to take certain risks. If you're going to have an intelligence agency -- and I've been very critical of the CIA. I haven't been someone who's -- I don't believe in revealing names of agents. I've tried not to do that. But there are some people who are doing it.

My basic feeling is that we have a First Amendment. We fought a small revolution in 1776 in order to establish it. It sometimes causes us pain and grief, and nevertheless it's the core of our system of government. And the minute you start writing little qualifiers saying, "Well, we can have freedom of the press except in areas that may cause some difficulty for an intelligence agency, or even place someone in danger," I think you are encroaching on the Constitution.

UNGAR: David Wise is coauthor of "The Invisible Government" and author of "The American Police State."